

The Other Side of Amusement

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This morning I read a short article in a Louisville paper which stated that the license for an amusement park in greater Louisville had not been renewed. After ten minutes of passive debate, the city council ruled as illegal the establishments of half a hundred small businessmen. Perhaps if the staid councilmen could have shared my experiences, they would have made a more liberal decision.

It was in the summer of 1946 that I, a lad of fifteen, was working as a barker at Riverside Park. This amusement center, owned by a little old lady who hated the sight of her property but loved the tidy income from, was operated by a good-humored loafer who constantly spoke of retiring, but who was thwarted because he had never really started to work.

My job as a barker made my position in Sunday School rather strained, for the good lady who shepherded us was firmly convinced that I had made a pact with the Devil and was a potential threat to the rest of her brood. I told her about the good, home-loving people who employed me; I explained that the games were strictly honest; but she stood firm in her convictions. It was not until I observed her running a bingo game that my standing in the group was restored. But I digress.

I make no apology about my job, for it was in those sessions that I was an eye-witness to many little dramas. I felt sorry for the boy who had taken his girl-friend out for an evening and found his money fast disappearing while the night was still young; and for the young married people who had brought their children out to the park for a good time, only to be rushed from one game to the next by their exuberant offsprings. There, too, I saw other children who pressed close, devouring the prizes with their eyes, longing for them, yet knowing that their empty pockets denied them even the smallest trinket. These little fellows watchd eagerly when someone played, their eyes shining if the player were lucky enough to win a tall lemonade pitcher or a cuddly "Kewpie-doll." It was as though they themselves had won. Soon they would move on to the next stand and repeat the performance. I often wondered how many times they could stand by, empty handed, before they became disappointed in a world which gave the good things to everyone else. But I had work to do.

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Come on in now! Pitch 'til you win! A prize each and every time, for each and every

dime!! Bring the lady in, and give her a souvenir! Just a dime — ten cents! Come in now! Pitch 'til you win!"

That was my spiel. It was true—a dime was all it cost, and a prize could be won—if you could throw a ball with the accuracy of a marksman's rifle. My conscience was clear, though; these boys were out for a good time. They had money to spend and very few places in this town to spend it. It was my job to charm the contents of their wallets into my change apron, but I believed in giving them some fun in the process. For instance, on Saturday night there was bound to be a drunk n the crowd. I found it helped business to have a noisy "polluted party-goer" at the counter. People who stopped to laugh, stayed to play. The inebriated business executive, in a strange town for a convention and usually escorting a lush female, was sure to be a good source of income. All year he worked hard and believed people thought him both stingy and boring. With some of his inhibitions lulled and away from his responsibilities, he was eager to prove himself an open-handed "good-fellow." His date and I helped him satisfy that desire. I am sure that more than one expense account bore some unusual entries.

From what I have said, the reader will assume that we were cunning merchants of mirth who preyed on the public's desire for relaxation. Such was not the case. We operated the same business year after year and knew that our future depended on how we treated today's customers. And there was a heart beating on the midway, for when the house of one of the employees burned, each stand donated one night's profits to help him rebuild. In addition, a chunk of the profits helped local charities and provided parties for servicemen.

Surely if the city council would accept the park with its concessions for what it is, rather than as the "holier-than-thous" would brand it, the license would be renewed.